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Youth in Transition: Are They Adult Learners?

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Abstract

Since at-risk youth are in transition to adulthood, major adult learning concepts can be applied to them. The purpose of this study was to describe the learning strategies of youth in transition to adulthood in the urban life skills program of A Pocket Full of Hope®. Both qualitative and quantitative data collecting methods were used. Assessing the Learning Strategies of AdultS (ATLAS) was also used to gather quantitative data, and individual interviews and focus groups were used to collect qualitative data. Youth in transition to adulthood in A Pocket Full of Hope® were found to have learning characteristics that were adult-like. The conclusions and recommendations related to ways of empowering students by creating learner-centered environments that will allow them to develop their full potential.

Introduction

Today's adolescents face a different social reality than their parents did. Contemporary music, sexual activity, gender confusion, violence, gang participation, and risky behavior are a few examples of challenges that face today's youth (Carroll, 1999). However, when youth are given a chance to develop high self-esteem and confidence and to gain control over a portion of their lives, they are better able to negotiate the turbulent path from childhood to adulthood. Education and training in life skills through school peer mediation, peer tutoring, and peer facilitation can empower these individuals to approach learning with new strategies in this

transition stage of their lives. Adult learning concepts support this approach to learning.

These youth are at-risk because of various societal factors. At-risk factors include chemical dependence, teenage pregnancy, poverty, disaffection with school and society, high mobility families, emotional and physical abuse, physical and emotional disabilities, and learning disabilities that do not qualify students for special education but nevertheless impede their progress (Capuzzi & Gross, 2000). Factors such as these cannot only cause school problem but can also lead to problems with the judicial system.

The statistics associated with being at-risk are staggering (Bennett, 1999). The percentage of births to

unmarried mothers among at-risk Blacks increased 200% between 1960 and 1997. Currently, more than two-thirds of all Black children are born out of wedlock. In 1997, 69.2% of births to Black mothers, 40.9% of births to Hispanic mothers, and 25.8% of births to White mothers were to unmarried women. The rate continues to rise with 40.7% of all 2012 births out-of-wedlock and with the out-of-wedlock rate highest among minorities: non-Hispanic blacks–72.2%, American Indians/Alaska Natives–66.9%, Hispanics–53.5%, non-Hispanics whites–29.4% , and Asians/Pacific Islanders–17.1% (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2013).

In 1971, Margaret Mead concluded in her famous study *Coming of Age in Samoa* that adolescence characteristics are solely determined by each culture. In traditional African societies, there is no ceremony at all to mark the transition to adulthood (Fortas, 1970). They believe that adolescence is not a separate stage of life, and people of different ages are not separate from each other. The social sphere of adult and child is undivided.

However, today's African-American society is considerably different than the traditional African society. African-American females, particularly those from low socioeconomic groups, are confronted with several risk factors as they progress through adolescence into adulthood. Some challenges encountered by African-American girls may not be experienced to the same degree by girls from other ethnic groups. African-American girls often at an early age undertake adult responsibilities such as the care of younger siblings or doing household duties (Belgrave et al., 2004; Henly,1993; Scott-Jones, Roland, & White, 1989).

Despite these challenges, African-Americans female adolescents exhibit strength and resiliency in many areas. Because these girls often assume adult responsibilities early, they may internalize high self-confidence and independence. For example, African-American female adolescents have lower levels of substance use (Gottfredson & Koper, 1996) and generally have higher self-esteem (Dukes & Martinez, 1994) and a more positive body image than White female adolescents (Akan & Grilo, 1995).

Some adolescents, especially those from low-

income families, may feel that life has little to offer in terms of middle class wealth; therefore, having a child may be one way of achieving status and of demonstrating self-expression. For some teenagers, having a baby is a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood.



The young African-American male is commonly appointed as the man of the house usually between the ages of 11 and 14 (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000). This is attributed largely to an increase in single parent female-headed households. The transition to adult years of young African-American males can be a time of extraordinary challenges. The African-American male is continually faced with many individual challenges that may not be issues for young White middle-class male. These challenges include staying alive to the age of 25 and encountering racism, prejudice, and discrimination (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000). Other challenges include taking on the role of father, brother, and caretaker for the family.

In addition to family and societal pressures, young African-American males face personal pressures. For the African-American male, personal growth is often complicated by poverty, urban living, limited educational and occupational opportunities, and a host of other social problems (Franklin, 1999). In recent years, terms such as "crisis," "at-risk," "marginal," and "endangered" have been used with increasing regularity to describe the plight and condition of young Black males (Anderson, 1990; Kunjufu, 1985; Madhubuti,

1990; Taylor-Gibbs, 1988).

As awareness of the acute nature of the problems facing young Black males has grown, an array of innovative educational programs aimed at preventing hardships and addressing the particular needs of these youth have been initiated. These initiatives have included various mentoring and job training programs that match youth with adult role models (McPartland & Nettles, 1991) as well as rites of passage programs aimed at socializing and preparing young males for manhood, fatherhood, and community responsibility (Watson & Smitherman, 1996). On the other hand, young females, particularly African American, can be consciously prepared for a sociopolitical environment of racial, gender, and economic oppression by fostering the development of a resistance that will provide the necessary tools to think critically about oneself, about the world, and about one's place in it (Robinson & Ward, 1991). In relationships like mother figures and "sister friends" or "sister girls", African-American girls have safe spaces for speaking up about their own realities which affirm their womanhood in connection with their community (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002).



As these youth are taking on adult roles, it is important to understand adult learning concepts. Adult education is "a process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values or skills" (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 9). Since at-risk youth are in transition to adulthood, major adult learning concepts that can be applied to them are andragogy, self-directed learning, perspective transformation, real-life learning, learning-how-to-learn, and empowerment. While all of these adult learning concepts are important, the concept of empowerment is of special importance for youth in transition.

Empowerment

For adult education, empowerment involves a personal sense of self-efficacy and competence. It establishes a sense of responsibility to change self and social conditions based on critical consciousness of conditions that are oppressive (Freire, 1973; Gutierrez, 1990; Kieffer, 1984; Lee, 1994; Rappaport, 1984; Robbins et al., 1998; Solomon, 1987; Staples, 1990). It provides skills to affect the behavior of others and to work in solidarity with others to obtain needed resources. It fosters planning and the implementation of social action efforts to remove power blocks and create liberating conditions. Empowerment occurs "when learners free themselves of oppression by demystifying knowledge and by critically redefining social reality in their own terms....Regardless of how it is defined, empowerment involves using learning from the social environment to understand and deal with the political realities of one's social and economic situation" (Fellenz & Conti, 1989, p. 21).

Empowerment for many people has come in the form of hope shared through music, food, laughter, and friendship. One place that has contributed to the empowerment of poor people, communities, and civic leaders is the Highlander Research and Education Center (Reyes & Gozemba, 2002). Highlander which was originally known as Highlander Folk School was

created in 1932 by Myles Horton and Don West in Grundy County, Tennessee. Lillian Johnson, a Tennessee educator and suffragist, donated her farm outside of the town of Monteagle where the founders established what was then known as the Highlander Folk School. It provided a glimmer of hope for people disempowered by the forces of capitalism and economic globalization. In 1932, Highlander gathered workers, grassroots leaders, community organizers, educators, and researchers to address the most pressing social, environmental, and economic problems facing the people of the South.

The power of the Highlander experience is the strength that grows within the soul of people, working together, as they analyze and confirm their own experiences and draw upon their understanding to contribute to fundamental change. (Highlander Research and Education Center, 1989)

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research departs from traditional methods because its purpose is to apply knowledge in a particular situation. Participatory action research is a term used for interactive approaches to research that aim to solve specific and practical problems that present themselves in any social setting (Merriam & Simpson, 1984). Participatory research is a self-conscious way of empowering people to take effective action toward improving conditions in their lives (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993, p. 1). Participatory research is a means of putting research capabilities in the hands of deprived and disenfranchised people so that they can transform their lives for themselves (p. 1). Participatory research is made up of ordinary people that have formed a partnership with researchers to solve problems, creating an educational transformative experience (p. 1). Participatory research is characterized by people personally analyzing the problems that affect them (Cain, 1976). Participatory research combines community participation in decision making with methods of social investigation to involve the people in the

research process so that it can serve the needs of the individuals rather than those of the policy makers who would prefer to value profits over people (Hall, 1977).



A Pocket Full of Hope® is part of a line of participatory research that uses the arts to help participants understand and critically reflect on their world. At A Pocket Full of Hope® music, drama, and dance, which are pleasurable and non-threatening, are used by participants to relive their experience of hopelessness so they can talk about it. In addition, developing the ability to imagine situations which do not exist is critical for understanding in reading, geography, history, and many other subjects.

Theater for years has been used as a tool for consciousness raising, problem solving, and social change. For example, Guerrilla Theater, Paulo Freire's Popular Theater, and the Theater of the Oppressed demonstrated that theater was one of the most effective tools to influence social change (Oliver, 1997). Many educators were aware of these varying types of social action theater, but few had used them for educational purposes.

In 1973 the Family Life Division of New York Medical College was the first group to develop and use

what was called a full literacy theater process. In this process teenagers from local high schools gather together to present scenes from their real world (Oliver, 1997). The teens were all nonprofessional actors who explored issues presented by the audience. Drugs, alcohol, health, and development issues were just a few of the topics discussed. Afterwards, the actors would stay in character while they dialogued with the audience.



Literacy Theater is a participatory research instructional technique that has shown itself to be a dynamic training tool for adult education (Oliver, 1997). In Literacy Theater, the participants identify their needs and concerns, base scenario on them, and dialogue with the characters and audience defining options, roles, and responsibilities. Participants explore the androgogical content of adult education, thus understanding how they learn with respect to their individual differences. Facilitators in Literacy Theater become aware of a variety of teaching methods that include providing for a positive learning environment, offering opportunities for success, providing awareness of student progress, and maintaining appropriate student-teacher interactions (Oliver, 1997, p. 5). Literacy Theater has been used in many ways. For example, in Montana the technique was

used to address issues of social action related to the Native American community with the group called the Montana Social Action Troupe (Oliver, 1997).

Literacy Theater provides an alternative model that encourages the learning process through nonlinear, holistic, and intuitive strategies (Oliver, 1997, p. 5). The approach is one that stimulates the nonverbal and emotional side of the brain, the right hemisphere. Most adult educators have training in college systems requiring a predominance of left-brain skills. However, the adults they work with in literacy programs are often most comfortable using their right brain (Oliver, 1997, p. 5).

Literacy Theater training is wonderful for the kinesthetic learners. During training workshops their enthusiasm for the process is infectious. The scenario process addresses the learning styles of both the listener and the speaker. It takes into account the intelligence of the linguist, the logical, the kinesthetic, and the interpersonal as defined by Gardner (Oliver, 1997). It is learning without lectures, blackboards, experts, flip charts, pencils, or workbooks.

All of these learner-centered approaches fit into the realm of individual differences (McClellan & Conti, 2008). When allowing for individual differences in lifelong learning, it is paramount that consideration be given to learning styles and learning strategies. The rudimentary practice of learning can be the critical exercise of applying lifelong experience. As strong learning strategies are applied and prove to be successful, a positive and rewarding academic experience can contribute to the continuation of lifelong learning. The concepts of learning styles and learning strategies should be immersed in the teaching environment, curriculum, and goals of every educational institution.

Research-Based Program

Those who either work with or live with youth have become increasingly aware of the potential that exists for the development of at-risk behaviors (Capuzzi & Gross, 2000). Youth are at-risk because of their life situations, but they have special experiences and responsibilities that they are undertaking that are adult

like. For example, many at-risk youth are single parents.

There are many youth in the American society at-risk who are going through all kinds of problems, and things are getting worse. These young people who are going through this transition in life are as if they are trapped in this moving vessel and cannot get out. The school system is failing them; that is why they are at-risk. However, there is an element of hope for them in the concepts of learner-centered principles.

One program that is working with at-risk youth in order to help them successfully make the transition from adolescence to adulthood is A Pocket Full of Hope®. This program is using learner-centered principles drawn from the adult education literature in its work with at-risk youth. In order to better understand youth in transition, research was conducted early on in the establishment of A Pocket Full of Hope®. This research has guided A Pocket Full of Hope® in all aspects of its program and administrative operations. This formative research is reported here.

The purpose of this initial research was to describe the learning strategies of youth in transition to adulthood in the urban life skills program of A Pocket Full of Hope®. The learning strategies of the youth in transition to adulthood in A Pocket Full of Hope® were identified with Assessing the Learning Strategies of AdultS (ATLAS) and were compared with those of the general adult population. ATLAS has been developed for measuring learning strategies in real-life situations (Conti, 2009). In addition, the participants were interviewed individually and in groups about how their life experiences relate to their approach to learning.

ATLAS was selected because it can be easily administered and has been proven to be a reliable and valid instrument when utilized to identify the learning strategy preferences of adults in real-life learning situations (Conti, 2009; Conti & McNeil, 2011; Sanders & Conti, 2012). ATLAS is a valid and reliable instrument that can be completed in approximately 1 to 3 minutes. The items are in a user-friendly, colorful booklet that can be completed quickly by reading items and flipping to the next relevant page based upon the response to the item. “Comments from field use with this

colored booklet overwhelmingly indicate that the participants find this format very nonthreatening and appealing” (Conti, 2009, p. 889).



ATLAS identifies three groups of learning strategy preferences, and these groups are named Navigators, Problem Solvers, and Engagers (Conti, 2009, p. 891). Each group differs in how its members seek to accomplish a learning task. “The Navigators and Problem Solvers initiate a learning task by looking externally from themselves at the utilization of resources that will help them accomplish the learning. Engagers, on the other hand, involve themselves in the reflective process of determining internally that they will enjoy the learning task enough to finish it” (p. 891). In this process, Navigators and Problem Solvers initiate their learning from the cognitive domain while Engagers begin in the affective domain (pp. 893-894). Navigators are focused learners who prefer a well-planned learning environment that is highly organized with schedules, deadlines, and clear learning objectives and expectations; Navigators chart a course for learning and follow it (p. 893). Problem Solvers are characterized by the use of the critical thinking strategy of generating alternatives, are comfortable dealing with abstract ideas, and often think in terms of symbols; they are storytellers who are very descriptive and detailed in their answers and use many examples to explain an idea (p. 894). Engagers are learners who personally determine that they will enjoy the learning task enough that it is worth

doing; for them, learning is an emotional process that hinges on building relationships with others (p. 894).

A Pocket Full of Hope®

Fundamental change is exactly what the youth in transition to adulthood experience in A Pocket Full of Hope®, a program for at-risk youth that was founded on the principles of learner-centered concepts. In this program, at-risk youth are given the opportunity to empower themselves. Drawing heavily on the model of Highlander, the environment of A Pocket Full of Hope® is non-threatening, participatory, and inclusive. It allows people who are poor and disadvantaged to share their ideas, talents, and resources. Like Highlander, A Pocket Full of Hope® has created little islands of decency, a place where people can be human (Horton, 1990, p. 17).

Even the curriculum development at A Pocket Full of Hope® has followed that of the Highlander model where the goal is “first to enliven then to enlighten” (Conti, 1977, p. 38). At A Pocket Full of Hope®, music, drama, and dance are used to enliven. Group singing, dancing, and role playing serve as a unifying tool as well as a means of communication. Singing, dancing, and acting out the realities and commonalities of their life situations serve the important psychological functions for members of creating a casual and cooperative atmosphere and of developing a spirit of invincibility.

A Pocket Full of Hope® is a non-profit 501(c)(3) community-based, life skills development organization that is committed to providing positive life alternatives to at-risk youth. A Pocket Full of Hope® offers youth a sense of belonging and a positive creative outlet for change in a safe non-threatening environment. A Pocket Full of Hope® works collaboratively within the community to educate and inform the public regarding issues associated with high-risk youth. This organization is dedicated to helping youth transition from a negative peer culture to a positive peer culture. The organization’s programs teach character development, good citizenship, teamwork, and life-skills training through an association with volunteers and staff who

believe in its goals.

A Pocket Full of Hope® targets the concerns of today’s youth. Such concerns include negative behavior, negative environmental factors, low self-esteem, substance abuse, and violence. These behaviors can lead to dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency, and destructive peer-group choices. A Pocket Full of Hope® provides a program of short-term and intensive intervention sessions which utilize music, drama, and dance therapy techniques. Additionally, A Pocket Full of Hope® offer participants the opportunity to continue their involvement once they graduate from the initial program.



A Pocket Full of Hope® was established in May of 2000 by Lester Shaw. Its program combines youth development with delinquency prevention in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding. The programs of A Pocket Full of Hope® assist young people and their families in exploring the world on their own terms as they develop internal strength mechanisms to help them deal with adverse environmental factors. A Pocket Full of Hope® offers youth access to knowledge about healthy choices that reinforce social skills and self-esteem and help them develop character and leadership skills. Thus, the organization helps to restore well being to the lives of troubled young people who are at risk of developing destructive behavior patterns and eventually dropping out of school.

Population

The population for this study was all youth who were participating in A Pocket Full of Hope®. ATLAS was administered to the entire population. All of the youth in transition between 13 and 18 were given ATLAS. However, for the interviews and focus groups, a stratified sample was used based on learning strategies. Two focus groups were held with each of the three learning strategy preference groups. Interviews were held with at least five participants in each of these learning strategy preference groups. Thus, while all members of A Pocket Full of Hope® completed ATLAS, separate focus group and interviews were conducted for Navigators, Problems Solvers, and Engagers.



There were 161 youth that participated in the study. There were 89 males and 72 females. The age range of the participants were from 11 to 23 years old with 88.1% 12 to 16 year old. Approximately one-fourth (25.8%) of the total group were 13 years old. The 14-year olds made up the second largest group (17.6%). Four groups each represented about one-tenth of the sample: 16-year olds (13.8%), 12-year olds (11.3%), 17-year olds (10.1%), and 15-year olds (9.4%).

The participants were predominantly African Americans (69.2%). Other groups included White (17.6%), Hispanics (5%), Native Americans (5%), and Asian American (3.1%). This is not representative of the over-

all population of Oklahoma; however, it is reflective of the neighborhoods that the youth come from. According to the 2001 United States Census, Oklahoma has a population of 3,460,097 with the following racial breakdown: White—76.2%, Native American—7.9%, African American—7.6%, Hispanic— 5.2%, and Asian—1.4%. The total population for Tulsa County of 564,079 people is similar to that of the state: White (75.0%) and African American (10.9%). However in North Tulsa where A Pocket Full of Hope® operates, the total population is 80% African American while the White population is about 20%.

In America, a major way of social mobility is education. A Pocket Full of Hope® stresses the role of education for empowering youth that are in transition to adulthood. Therefore, the participants were asked about their intention about attending college. A sizable majority (97.3%), of the participants indicated they plan to go to college. The result of this trend reflects the growing number of participants in A Pocket Full of Hope® that are being empowered to look beyond their present impoverished existence to gain the confidence to plan for a better life. This is an enormous transformation given the high drop-out rate in the area of North Tulsa where the study was conducted.

ATLAS Findings

All 161 youth completed ATLAS. Chi square was used to examine the difference between the observed ATLAS scores and the expected ATLAS scores based on the norm groups for creating ATLAS. The frequency observed in this study was found to be systematically different from the frequency expected based on the database to which it was compared. It was logical to expect the results to show 36.5% Navigators, 31.8% Engagers, and 31.7% Problem Solvers among this group of participants (Conti, 2009). ATLAS results indicated that 45% of the participants were Engagers, 35.4% were Navigators, and 20.6% were Problem Solvers.

While this distribution is significantly different from the norm which has a fairly even distribution of the three groups, the comments of youth in transition about

learning strategy preferences were very similar to comments by adults. In reply to what teacher actions they find helpful, the comments by each learning strategy preference group for the youth in transition were similar to the adult learners.

Navigators stressed that the most helpful teachers were organized and provided structure. Just like the adult learners, these young Navigators preferred efficiency in the learning situation. They preferred teachers that did not waste their time by asking them to participate in things that the learner believed delayed the completion of an activity.

Problem Solvers indicated that helpful teachers jump started them when they got in a slump. They would take time to help students generate new alternatives in areas that were troubling. Helpful teachers wrote down examples of how problems are done, used illustrations, or showed films about a subject.

Like adult Engagers, the youth in transition who were Engagers highly valued personal relationships in a learning situation. Engagers described helpful teachers as those who demonstrated that they cared about students on a personal level and how they learned.

Similarity of Youth and Adult Learning Strategies

Youth in transition to adulthood have the learning strategy preference characteristics of adult learners. When asked to describe their approach to learning, the youth in transition to adulthood Navigators are generally focused, results-oriented, high achievers who like logical connections, planning, and organizing just like adults. In their comments, the youth in transition sound remarkably similar to adults. For example, in relationship to how they prefer to first gather enough information before they start a project, a 14-year-old Black female said:

I like to sort everything out first. For example, for a science project I have to know the measurements, inches. Then I would lay everything out in front of me on a table so I she can see it.

Likewise, a 49-year old female Navigator and a 67-year-old male used a similar structure for planning their strategy for bidding on items in an ebay on-line auction:

I used the various steps of the decision making process: Identify, Analyze, Decide, and Execute. I just used the same processes I used with any other decision in life. (51-year-old male Navigator). (Ghost Bear, 2001, pp. 111-112)

I'm just starting. "Strategy" implies a predictable opponent; I think the other bidders are unknowable and unpredictable. So the best "strategy" is just to know what you want to spend and get it into the system as a bid. (67-year-old male). (Ghost Bear, 2001, p. 373)

The youth in A Pocket Full of Hope® were similar to those out of the school system. For example, in using resources an 18-year-old Black female at A Pocket Full of Hope® said:

I have to check out whatever resources I need to do a learning project before I can get into it.

In a similar fashion, an 18-year old Black female who was in an Adult Basic Education program said:

I have to check out whatever resources I need to enable myself to do a learning project before I can get into it. (James, 2000, p. 111)

Youth in transition to adulthood Problem Solvers indicated that they like hands-on projects and do not like to be interrupted during a task once they have started it; this is comparable to adult learners. In their comments, the youth in transition to adulthood Problem Solvers and adult Problem Solver sound astoundingly similar. For example, high school noncompleters (James, 2000), eBay users (Ghost Bear, 2001), and SeniorNet users (Girdner, 2004) showed similarities in how both adult and youth in transition Problem Solvers indicated that they like hands-on projects and do not

like to be interrupted during a task.

I hate to be interrupted. Once I am interrupted it is hard for me to get back into focus. (13 year-old Black female Problem Solver)

I like a hands-on project. I don't want to watch someone else do something. I want to get my hands on it. (19-year-old White male Problem Solver) (James, 2000, p. 112)

A lifelong reader. I own a library spread over a number of topics. I still buy books on the net. I also use the Copernicus search engine, one of the best. (74-year-old female Problem Solver) (Girdner, 2004, p. 163)

I spend a great deal of time reading. I learn much that way, and additionally to websites that feature "how to" articles. One can't be afraid to speak up on the Internet and the results will be amazing. (77-year-old male Problem Solver) (Girdner, 2004, p. 146)

Youth in transition Engagers are passionate learners who love to learn with feeling; must be engaged in a meaningful manner; desire a relationship between the task, the environment, and the teacher; and want resources to be readily available. These characteristics are just like the adult learners. For example, a 16-year-old Black female Engager in this study said, "I have to be able to relate to whatever it is I'm suppose to do" (16-year-old Black-female Engager). Likewise, adult Engagers in a high school noncompleters study (James, 2000), eBay study (Ghost Bear, 2001), and SeniorNet study (Girdner, 2004) show how Engagers are passionate learners who love to learn with feeling and who feel that projects must be fun before they will engage in it.

I used to work for this old carpenter. He told me that I was the kind of guy who needed to be able to see what work I had done, that was the

satisfaction that I got from it. That I would do something and then back off and look at it. I didn't know that about me, but it's true. (50-year-old White male) (James, 2000, p. 111)

I enjoy the Computer Questions and help, and even when I don't need any instructions, I can learn from others. (77-year-old female Engager) (Girdner, 2004, p. 145)

eBay is a riot! I work with computers all the time anyway, but eBay has made me much more comfortable with on-line shopping in general. (42-year-old female Engager) (Ghost Bear, 2001, p. 231)

I like to keep up with items using "My eBay". I watch as the end of the auction nears by pressing the refresh button on the computer while on the "My eBay" page. If it is an item I am not particularly in love with but would like to have, I put in what I am willing to pay the day before it closes and look at it the day after it closes. (45-year-old female Engager) (Ghost Bear, 2001, p. 369).

Youth and Voluntary Learning

Because youth in transition to adulthood are mandated to attend school, the voluntary nature of adult learning is violated for them. "Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy" (Knowles, 1990, p. 31). Brookfield (1986) has enunciated six principles which he uses to describe the guidelines for adult teaching and learning. They are those of voluntary participation, mutual respect, collaborative spirit, action and reflection, critical reflection, and self-direction (pp. 9-20).

Adult learning is usually motivated by the need to acquire a new skill or make a decision. When adults perceive a need to learn something, they are generally capable of working very hard. Since most adult learning is voluntary, adults also have the prerogative of drop-

ping out of programs that do not meet their needs.

Adults are often considered as time-conscious learners. Adults have many roles such as spouse, parent, employee, and community member in addition to that of learner. Therefore, most want to meet their educational goals as directly, quickly, and efficiently as possible. However, what is important may vary among adults.



Adults engage in educational programs for a variety of reasons. Most are job-related reasons, but others take nonoccupational courses for personal or social reasons. Because adults know what goals are important to them, they tend to do best in educational experiences that provide what they value. Adults wish to be treated as such.

By adulthood, individuals have developed an independent view of self, and most adults want to be treated as responsible individuals with the capacity to determine things for themselves. Adult learning situations should be designed to allow adults to retain as much autonomy as possible. Because some adults have experienced only structured and teacher-centered learning environments, they may need assistance in accepting responsibility for their own learning.

On the other hand, youth in transition to adulthood are mandated to attend school. This is a sharp contradiction to the voluntary nature of adult learning. Nevertheless, youth in transition to adulthood typically have responsibilities that are adult-like. Consequently,

they often view themselves as adults. Youth that are in transition to adulthood are facing some troubling issues such as dropping out of school, drugs, violence, sexual activity, contemporary music, gender confusion, gang participation, and risky behavior. They are avidly taking their own pulses sorting out the tangible and intangible factors that influence their directions. The transition of youth to adulthood is difficult even in the best of times, but these are the worst of times for significant numbers of American youth. They are struggling in a confusing world that has them having adult-like responsibilities at home but being treated like children in school. When youth in transition to adulthood are in school, most are exposed to a teacher-centered approach which treats them like children, and this can cause a conflict in their own perception of self (Knowles, 1975). This conflict is compounded with the frustrations and demands placed upon them by parents, schools, teachers, and their social environment making it difficult to focus on learning. Traditional educational environments can be oppressive for the least social and academic achievers (James, 2000). Unlike adults, youth in transition to adulthood do not have the option to leave a learning activity once they see that it is not going to benefit them. By law, youth must attend school or be in jeopardy of truancy which could lead to harsh disciplinary action by the school district or can result in jail time.

This pedagogical model is contrary to the voluntary nature of adult learning. In this model, teachers assume responsibility for making decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, and when it will be learned (Knowles, 1980). Teachers direct learning while students are passive recipients. Youth are required to adjust to an established curriculum based on the teacher's experience and knowledge. The pedagogical model often times inhibits the learner from making a contribution to the learning process. As a result, many learners leave school having lost interest in learning. Even good-intentioned educators can suppress naturally inquisitive instincts of the students by controlling the learning environment. When this happens, some youth in transition to adulthood view learning as a chore and a burden.

Jump Starting Learning

It is important for teachers to know that they can jump start the learning process for students by utilizing a knowledge of learning strategies. For Navigators, “everything in the learning environment relates to achieving efficiency and effectiveness” (Conti & Kolody, 2004, p. 185). Therefore, teachers can get them started in the learning process simply by being organized, giving clear directions, making sure that they know what is wanted from them, and then getting out of their way.



For Problem Solvers who are constantly seeking alternatives (Conti & Kolody, 2004, p. 186), a good teacher will not only let the students explore but will help them get started again when they get lost or stuck. Problem Solvers indicated that the most helpful teachers offered personal attention and provided alternative formats, options, and illustrations. Therefore, a teacher can jump start the learning for Problem Solvers by making sure that they have a grasp of the learning task early in the learning process so that they can immediately accelerate down the path of generating alternatives.

“Because the central feature of learning for Engagers is building relationships” (Conti & Kolody, 2004, p. 187), Engagers viewed good teachers as those who are friendly, respectful, and understanding to students and who show that they enjoy teaching. Once involved, Engagers take learning personally. Their self-worth can be validated or easily damaged. Since the

messenger is important to Engagers, teachers can jump start Engagers by being excited about the learning process, by being personable, by caring about the students, and by engaging them in a meaningful manner. If the Engagers feels a personal relationship with the teacher and likes the teacher, who is a pleasant person to be around, then Engagers will substitute their need for internal motivation to initiate the learning activity with this external stimulus by the teacher.

Discussion

Youth in Transition to Adulthood

Youth in transition to adulthood need to understand how school or learning is relevant to their personal goals and how they go about the learning process. This can be achieved by clearly identifying their learning goals. This can help learners to overcome distractions in order to stay focused on learning projects.

Learners should pursue an understanding of all learning strategies and techniques. An awareness of learning strategies can improve the learning process (Munday, D., 2002; Munday, W., 2002). This knowledge can also help learners be more tolerant of different learning strategy preferences of other individuals. Engagers can form study groups to utilize their strengths and assist in ensuring their success in learning activities.

Traditional educational environments can be oppressive for the marginal social and academic achievers. While the traditional teacher-centered classroom can be well suited for the learning needs of Navigators, it is often frustrating for Engagers. Indeed, many Engagers seem to be seeking alternative educational situations. Nearly half of all of the participants of A Pocket Full of Hope® are Engagers. Ongoing research has found an identical percentage of Engagers in career technical programs in Oklahoma (Ausburn, L. J., 2004a, 2004b); these are students who tend to be alienated in the traditional system and are seeking an alternative that is more personal and student-centered. Likewise, research has found a disproportionately large number of Engagers in programs and organizations such

as literacy program (James, 2000), community colleges (Willyard, 2002), or special col-leges (Massey, 2002) that have an image of and promote a message of being people-friendly organizations.



By taking a proactive stance, these learners can change the system so that it works for everyone. Learners become empowered when they become aware of the forces controlling them and aware that their empowerment can lead to action which may be applicable for nonsuccessful learners in traditional education (Freire, 1970). Therefore, youth in transition to adulthood must assume responsibility for their own education and become part of a learning community. With an awareness of learning strategies and familiarity with learning strategy methods and techniques, youth in transition to adulthood could become self-directed and more empowered to help themselves. As Knowles (1975) described, self-directed learning is “a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others”(p. 18).

A Learner-Centered Approach

A great deal of research has been done to understand learning strategy concepts. This understanding can offer struggling learners and educators a way to make a difference in the educational success of youth in transition to adulthood. The progress being

made in the development of learning strategy concepts and techniques offers a ray of hope so that more students can learn techniques for succeeding in their educational and noneducational endeavors. Advocates for learners who are unsuccessful in traditional education might consider utilizing the learner-centered concepts and techniques used by A Pocket Full of Hope® to heighten awareness of struggling students and to assist them in identifying problems and solutions. When introducing this learner-centered education model, one must keep in mind that it involves the learner. In this approach, administrators are responsible for developing, maintaining, and enhancing a learning environment that promotes effective learning. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about the learning strategies of their students and about how learning occurs best for each one. The classroom is an environment that encourages learners to develop to their full potential.

Highlander is a great example of a learner-centered program model. This model has been adopted by A Pocket Full of Hope® because of the non-threatening, participatory, and inclusive concept design. Highlander was created to educate rural and industrial leaders for a new social order and adopted its name from the mountain people of Appalachia (Adams, 1975). Supported by John Dewey's philosophy that "civil and political democracy were meaningless without equivalent economic and industrial democracy" (p. 13), Horton cultivated the school to be a haven where "people could make decisions on things that mattered" (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, p. 58). The school was established on the principle that individuals were empowered through working in harmony to fulfill common needs (Adams, 1975, pp. 15-16). Highlander's initial purpose was to educate people "for a revolution that would basically alter economic and political power relationships to the advantage of the poor and powerless" (p. 205), which in short could assist in creating leadership for democracy. The birth of Highlander Folk school exemplified "an adult education program that promised both to benefit the people of southern Appalachia and to transform the social, economic, and political order" (Glen, 1996, p. 24).

People associated with Highlander have impacted many social issues since 1932. In the 1930s and 1940s, Highlander focused on organizing labor unions especially in the textile and mining industries. During this time, the school gained a reputation as one of few schools in the South that was committed to organized labor and economic justice causes (Glen, 1996, p. 55). The Civil Rights Movement was the focus of Highlander's work in the 1950s and 1960s. The school was a leader in the war to end racism and gender discrimination in the South. In the wake of Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 and in a time when many African-American women were domestic employees in White households, the people of Highlander struck out against racial segregation and gender bias. Black and White people of both genders learned side by side in the Citizenship Schools and other important Highlander contributions. Such leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Andrew Young, and Septima Clark worked, learned, became empowered, and were impacted at Highlander (Adams, 1975; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990; Glen, 1996).

Today, the Highlander Education and Research Center maintains an idea and a place "where strategies for progressive change can be developed" (Glen, 1996, p. 282). Highlander gathered workers, grassroots leaders, community organizers, educators, and researchers to address the most pressing social, environmental, and economic problems facing the people of the South. The fundamental premise of Highlander is that people have the potential within themselves to solve their problems. This learner-centered approach allows people who are poor and disadvantaged to share their ideas, talents, and resources.

Using the Highlander model, A Pocket Full of Hope® serves to help empower youth in transition to adulthood to take charge of their lives. For example, it uses the Highlander model to focus on defining problems and discussing positive and negative experiences which provide valuable insight for learners and facilitators. Instruction in learning strategy concepts and techniques include development programs for those working with youth in transition to adulthood. Instruction in learning

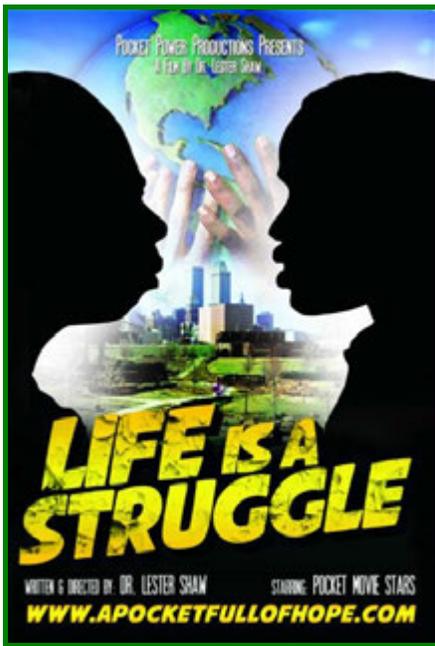
strategy concepts and techniques are offered to all students. When students enroll in the urban life-skills development program of A Pocket Full of Hope®, they are given ATLAS and an explanation of their learning strategy groups.



Youth in transition to adulthood are given the opportunity to empower themselves by sharing their ideas, talents, and resources. At A Pocket Full of Hope®, music, drama, and dance are used to help participants feel more comfortable with each other while breaking down barriers. Group singing, dancing, and role playing serve as a unifying tool as well as a means of communication. Singing, dancing, and acting out the realities and commonalities of their life situations serve the important psychological functions for members of creating a casual and cooperative atmosphere and of developing a sense of empowerment. A Pocket Full of Hope® is a safe place where participants feel encouraged to be themselves.

Myles Horton's philosophy is echoed in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Freire's practice of adult learning was developed in the 1960s and 1970s through revolutionary struggles in Brazil and Chile. Through his efforts to obliterate illiteracy, Freire (1970) fought to help poor and oppressed people overcome their sense of powerlessness and to function on their own behalf. People victimized by the censorship of illiteracy learned more effectively when the words and

phrases mastered were charged with political importance. Freire believed that adult learning succeeded best in oppressive circumstances when it was a consciously political act in which the learners used their experiences to reflect and take social action. He believed that education not only empowered learners individually but served to change all peoples' social structures. From this viewpoint, adult learning "attempts to provide space for learners who have been marginalized or silenced by the power structures within which they live" (Amstutz, 1999, p. 21).



The term "pedagogy of the oppressed" was created by Paulo Freire (1970) who described it as "a pedagogy which must be forged *with* not *for* the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity" (p. 30). Pedagogy of the oppressed has two distinct stages. In the first stage, oppressed people recognize and expose the world of oppression and "through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation" (p. 36). Secondly, the transformed reality of oppression changes from belonging just to the oppressed people to belonging to all people through the process of lasting liberation (p. 36). Action that confronts the dominant culture is a common denominator in both stages of the pedagogy of the oppressed.

Freire concluded that education is never neutral. It either serves to oppress or to liberate, but it is never impartial or uninvolved. Education must be founded on the ethical and political principles that empower learners to control their own lives and histories (Freire, 1994, p. 128). In A Pocket Full of Hope®, youth in transition to adulthood are given the opportunity to empower themselves. These youth are part of a learner-centered environment where programs have been tailored to fit their individual learning needs. Participants are free to take ownership of the program without the fear of being ridiculed or judged negatively by their peers. Gaining early success within the program helps youth in transition to adulthood become motivated to start improvements in other areas of their life.

The programs of A Pocket Full of Hope® assist youth in transition to adulthood and their families in exploring the world on their own terms as they develop the internal strength mechanisms to help them deal with adverse environmental factors. A Pocket Full of Hope® offers youth access to knowledge about healthy choices that reinforce social skills and self-esteem and helps them develop character and leadership skills. Thus, it helps to restore well-being to the lives of troubled young people who are at risk of developing destructive behavior paradigms and eventually dropping out of school.

Creating learner-centered programs for youth in transition to adulthood has given A Pocket Full of Hope® a mechanism for working with youth that would not have been available in a teacher-centered environment. With the learner-centered approach, teachers or facilitators are familiar with content knowledge but have design flexibility for learners to construct their learning. The learner's individual needs and characteristics take precedence over knowledge of facts and skills. The emphasis is on showing the learners how to learn for understanding and critical thinking, thus helping them build their own interpretations. Facilitators at A Pocket Full of Hope® practice this model. They provide learners with a variety of instructional methods and techniques to help them construct their learning and to develop strategies for applying

knowledge and theory. The focus of this learner-centered model is on metacognition, which is understanding how individual students learn.

However, students do not learn at the same pace. Some learn quickly and easily while others need more time. The teacher-centered approach places total control for learning in the hands of the teacher. The teachers use their expertise in cognitive content knowledge to help learners make connections. The effort to get to know the learner and how they process information is secondary. This one-size-fits-all teacher-centered instructional model often results in youth in transition to adulthood being ill prepared for life outside the learning environment. Sternberg (1988) views “the intelligent person as someone who can use his or her mind to the fullest advantage in all the various transactions of everyday life, and is not limited only to test results or classroom performance” (p. 3).

In the teacher-centered environment, youth are stripped of their identity and their passion to learn is suppressed. The students see the classroom experience as uncool and uninteresting. Thinking is basically the responsibility of the teacher. Students remain passive learners and are required to memorize and recite the information that is given to them. If this were a theatrical play or a movie, the teacher-centered instructional model would cast the teacher as the star or the main character while casting the students as extras or props. There is an enormous amount of pressure placed on youth in transition to adulthood to measure up to so many unrealistic learning expectations that many students are now viewing teacher-centered environments as overwhelming and impossible.

Furthermore, the teacher-centered instructional model can be difficult for the least academic achiever. More appealing though is the attraction that comes with being accepted in the subculture created by the students outside of the learning environment. The subculture created within the school environment maintains a sophisticated level of hierarchy. For example, youth in transition to adulthood often gravitate to other youth because of sports, special relationships, race, gang affiliation, music interest, or substance abuse. Students

therefore will seek to form peer alliances hoping to increase their chance to attain a certain level of success, to build self-esteem, or to maintain their reputation and popularity. These students gravitate to each other because of similar non-academic interest. This subcultural affiliation provides a predictable familiarity to counterbalance a rigid teacher-centered environment that is increasingly pushing them out whether this approach is intended to feed the student’s desperate desire for status or to provide instant gratification is questionable. However, the non-academic subcultural is spontaneous for students as they look for diversions to digress from an oppressive teacher-centered learning environment. Nonetheless the risk of dropping out of school for these youth in transition to adulthood increases dramatically.



Comer (1996) acknowledged that educators must understand that all students are at-risk of not learning today. It is well documented that there is an increase of homes led by single mothers. Also, there is an increase of two parents working outside the home. For children to develop, healthy and well-functioning adults must be available and attentive to them at all times. Furthermore, teachers, facilitators, and administrators need to

realize that youth in transition to adulthood could have responsibilities that are adult like. Therefore, teachers reliance on the teacher-centered pedagogical learning model should be unlearned. The pedagogical teacher-centered model does not allow students to be self-directed. It restricts the learners from taking responsibility for their own learning. When students are not allowed to take part in their own learning, they become disengaged, or helpless, relying not on their own initiatives to learn but on that of others.

Moreover, “whether viewed scientifically or artistically, learning is a process grounded in the individual’s perceptions of place” (Kittredge, 1998, p. 12). All students are not going to grasp this new found knowledge of learner-centered concepts. Therefore, teachers need help to develop skills to look for learners to jump start when they get lost or stuck. The responsibility of the facilitator is to help students develop confidence and competence as self-directed learners. In a learning environment, the teacher is considered the messenger. The Engagers meanwhile focuses on the messenger first and then on the message. The Navigators could care less about the messenger while staying focused on the message.

Learning strategy research has evolved from adult education, adult learning, learning how to learn, and identification of learning strategy preference categories (James, 2000). However, teachers may lack access to the services of researchers or designers and as a result be forced to rely on their own expertise in planning instruction for learners (Ausburn & Ausburn, 1977, p. 278). Therefore, teachers need information they can use that can maximize learning experiences for students in the classroom. Instructors are encouraged to capitalize on learner strengths or help learner develop a range of learning capabilities (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). This can be accomplished by instructors of youth that are in transition to adulthood becoming knowledgeable of the concept of learning strategy preferences. This includes both learning about the concept and identifying their learning strategy preferences. This knowledge “can be beneficial to the selection of appropriate methods and discussion, and reflective

thought about the learner” (Conti & Kolody, 2004, p. 187). This could make them more learner centered and help them understand that youth in transition to adulthood students are not all the same that they learn differently.

High schools can no longer function as the pervasive or exclusive environment for the transition of youth to adulthood. As Malcolm Knowles (1970) proposed, “teachers should be more student-centered and curriculum be more real-life based” (p. 49). The secondary school environment is usually part of a system designed with limited learner flexibility and autonomy. Students in these teacher-centered environments have little knowledge of self-directed concepts and are ill prepared about what to do after completing high school. They are passive learners with little or no real-life learning experience (Sternberg, 1990). These students can find it hard to make choices due to limited opportunities to practice these real-life learning skills. When instructors are able to accommodate differences in individual abilities, styles, and preferences, then it is expected that learning outcomes will improve (Jonassen & Grabowski, 1993). Thus, all participants can come to an understanding of their roles and the changing nature of their roles as high school departure gets closer.

Real-life learning is the ability to learn on a recurring basis in every-day, real-world circumstances (Ghost Bear, 2001, p. 39). This learning occurs from the learner's real-life conditions and requires a comprehension of such "personal factors as the learner's background, language, and culture as well as social factors such as poverty and discrimination" (Fellenz & Conti, 1989, p. 25).

Therefore, it is all the more reason that learner-centered environments like A Pocket Full of Hope® be created. Within such organizations, youth in transition to adulthood become empowered through programs developed especially for them in the final years of secondary school. This introduces high school students to a wide variety of options enabling them to move beyond the classroom into real-life situations in the neighborhood and the community to complete their education.

Learner-centered environments such as A Pocket Full of Hope® provide learners with an understanding of their own learning requirements. Brown (1985) defined the knowledge and control one has over one's thinking and learning as metacognition (Counter & Fellenz, 1993, p. 10). Metacognition is a conscious, reflective endeavor requiring the learner to analyze, assess, and manage learning activities. It is important that youth in transition to adulthood have some control over their learning processes and become "aware of oneself as a learner" (Smith, 1982, p. 57) because they qualify as adult learners.



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